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## Marginalisation of Culture and Aesthetics in the Polish School Seen through the Eyes of Its Students

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### Abstract

The article presents the results of an Internet questionnaire examining high school graduates' (general education high schools and technical high schools) perceptions on aesthetical and cultural education in the institutional context. The study was based on students' narratives gathered by means of a purpose-designed interview questionnaire using the methodology of interpretive anthropology in relation to the perspective of an 'insider' or a 'local'. The results were further organised accordingly with the strategy of horizontalisation, which made it possible to construct a model encompassing all the participants' contributions.

**Keywords:** *culture, education, qualitative research*

### Introduction

Clifford Geertz emphasises the significance of culture, pointing to its formational dimension. He finds it impossible for the human brain to be controlled only internally. He claims that, in addition to its autonomy, the brain does need coevolution with culture. It is immersion in culture which conditions a human being's development (Geertz, 2001, pp. 203–217). Moreover, culture provides background for the cognition of events accompanying human development, even though it proves to be no driving force itself. On the contrary, social events, behaviours,

institutions or processes result from culture. Culture constitutes a context and enables a description of reality (Geertz, 1973, p.14). From this perspective, culture appears as a dimension shedding light on the reality we exist in. The school, with its intended mission of providing suitable conditions for students to grow and develop their potential, is also located in this dimension. Thus, culture, as an object and element of the school's functioning, becomes a substance of the environment, making it easier or, alas, more difficult for the young person to grow. The aim of the study is to present students' opinions concerning shortcomings and errors in aesthetic and cultural education at school. I found it important to establish whether participants in public education perceive planned enculturation-oriented activities in terms of shortcomings and needs to be addressed or whether they think that their schools handle the subject properly.

## **Research method**

According to Umberto Eco, research in aesthetics and on aesthetics ought to be structured basing on a bipolar relation between the precise and the unquantifiable. He understands aesthetics as a discipline capable of designing its own methods and research tools (Eco, 1990, pp. 62–78). This is why the presented study adopts Geertz's ideas, i.e., showing aesthetical education through information provided by students, subjective and marked by personal experience (as cited in: Russell T. McCutcheon). For this is students, immersed in the school's reality, who are the most knowledgeable in this study's subject. Thus, we can see the school's aesthetical education "through local eyes" (Geertz, 2000), reaching interpretive anthropology, focusing on an interpretation of culture performed by a person (here: a participant in education). In our case, however, each respondent to the questionnaire will become a researcher interpreting culture (aesthetics). Therefore, we are dealing with a research approach involving participation, as an insider becomes a researcher (Headland, Pike, Harris, 1990). This is what enables us to apply a particular type of data collection, where the data becomes substance of thick description (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3–30) or grounded theory (Gibson, Hartman, 2014).

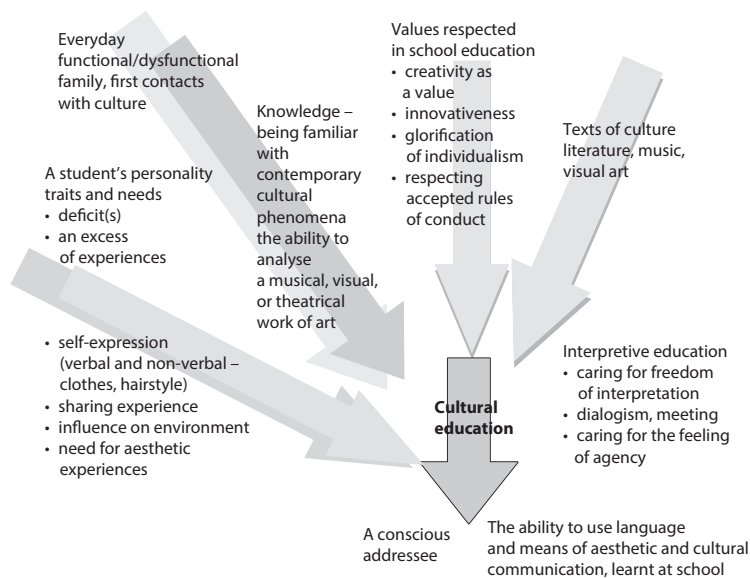
The next step is further interpretation of the narration. This time it will be performed by a researcher from outside the school (here: the present author). Then, in line with Moustakas' horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96), the students' responses will be clustered into sub-themes, which in turn will be used to form core themes. Horizontalization is treated as a way of finding meaningful units (invariant horizons).

The responses were gathered via a purpose-made internet questionnaire, in which each informant had a chance to create quite an extensive narration. 201 responses were collected electronically from recent graduates (ones who graduated from high school in 2017, the year this study was carried out). The large number of responses prompted the introduction of quantitative data into the analysis, rendering the study exceeding the limits of purely interpretive (qualitative) research. Therefore, the *mixed-method research* approach (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, Turner, pp. 112–133) was applied.

The way the respondents structured their narrations allowed for annotating the material with relevant codes and, further, categories. This, in turn, facilitated a presentation of empirical data free from repetitions, the latter being otherwise unavoidable in such a number of respondents. In order to provide clear examples, the narrations will be presented in an intentional, representative selection.

The introduction to the questionnaire contained a graph showing a model of the complex basis for aesthetical education.

The components of cultural/aesthetical education are shown in Figure 1<sup>1</sup>, further developed or corrected in the questionnaire by the respondents.



**Figure 1.** A model of components present in aesthetic/cultural education

<sup>1</sup> The model is a modified version of the graph in: Krasoń, p 49.

Placing this model at the beginning of the questionnaire proved an effective way of directing the data collection process. It appeared that the respondents analysed the figure in rather much detail. The responses received in the electronic form were most informative and offered honest reflection.

## Results

Let us begin with pointing to the significance of particular components of cultural/aesthetic education. The sum total of the graduates' choices is presented in Table 1. Out of the components presented in Figure 1, the respondents could choose 4 which were significant to them.

**Table 1.** High school graduates' choices considering key components of the cultural and aesthetical school education model

Component	Number of participants who chose the component	Percentage
One's own personality traits	62	30.8 %
Family and first contacts with culture	144	71.6 %
School education	126	62.7 %
The media and cultural institutions	101	50.2 %
Knowledge	84	41.8 %
Texts of culture, music, literature, visual arts	162	80.6 %
Values respected in school education	53	26.4 %
The aesthetics of space at schools, their rooms, the buildings and their surroundings	10	5.0 %
Others	3	1.5 %

Source: own research

Analysis of the responses reveals that the youth ascribed much less significance to satisfying their own needs (the constituents of the "one's own personality traits" category) – less than 31%. Meanwhile, the young adults group found contact with texts of culture to be the most significant. Unfortunately, the aesthetics of school space were located at the bottom of the list. However, the fact that the students ascribed low significance to this factor results from institutional negligence. Most interestingly, the graduates emphasised the significance of family and the first

contact with culture experienced at home. School education came third – this comes as uplifting news. Let us then examine the way our young respondents evaluated this component in more detail (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Deficits and negligence in school aesthetic and cultural education experienced by the respondents/graduates

Exemplary descriptions	Themes/Code
Knowledge of culture was neglected at school. Instead of teaching us how to behave, those lessons were giving us worthless information about the country's architecture. There was also little attention paid to cultural institutions, which is why only rarely did we go to the theatre, cinema, museum and opera	Lack of knowledge of culture
In my opinion, the aesthetics of the building and of certain rooms was neglected, e.g., water started dripping from one room's ceiling as there were holes in the roof. Most rooms needed renovation, there was fungus on some walls, which made us unwilling to participate in classes	Neglected aesthetics of the building
One had to follow the proper answer key, which contributes to a lack of freedom of interpretation Possibility of one's own style within a permitted range, if somebody crossed the "line/norm" they were warned and it was negated It was rarely that we went, e.g., to see a play BECAUSE a 'dry' and theoretical lesson is important, something could be missed and we would be behind schedule, which would be a crime	Lack of empowerment and individualism
The will to express myself in words, but also non-verbally in clothes, hairstyle, and manner – in my school, there was a precise model of a student – what a student should look like, how they should behave, what they should say. It was forbidden, e.g., to dye your hair red or to wear trousers with holes in them. This led to students' escalating their individuality and becoming hostile towards the teachers. The school's regulations were constantly violated. In consequence, another component was disappearing, and that was individuality, which is the unique and the unrepeatable in any person	Lack of empowerment and individualism Dress code unification
Mandatory texts of culture and literary texts were discussed. Non-mandatory texts, which might sometimes help to understand better, to broaden cultural knowledge and education. School education – limited possibility of one's own interpretation, little possibility of expressing one's own opinion about cultural works	Only obligatory content
Individualism was rather unwelcome, which is why persons looking different were objects of mockery. Education was limited to passing on knowledge about a given text of culture or author, it was difficult to make anyone interested due to lack of time for details. There was no talk of aesthetics, I think that lack of aesthetic, 'clean' interiors in schools causes difficulty learning in the lessons.	Lack of individualism in self-presentation Ugly school

Exemplary descriptions	Themes/Code
<p>My traits – the school had strict rules of appearance and behaviour. There was a ban on nail painting, visible hair colouring, or clothes showing too much skin. This significantly limited the students' self-expression. It made a person who looked controversial draw even more attention to themselves.</p> <p>School education – unfortunately, while interpreting poems and paintings, we did not have much freedom, we had to learn how to think schematically. It was most limiting and resulted in lack of creative thinking</p>	<p>Lack of feeling of sense and agency</p> <p>Individualism in self-presentation banned</p>
<p>Family, first contact with culture – The teacher was not aware that many people did not have too much knowledge about culture because at home that knowledge was not passed on too much. The consequence of this was that the students were often unable to understand more difficult issues connected with culture</p>	<p>Lack of interest in students' families</p>
<p>In my school, strong emphasis was put on the best marks or attendance possible. This led to a neglect of students as humans who, in addition to studying for tests, have other interests, passions they would like to develop. In consequence, time had to be spent doing homework and studying, which made it impossible to work on self-realisation, working out one's own opinion, gaining different life experiences and sharing them with others. Additionally, it was not possible to express oneself in words or hardly anyone felt like doing it, as it was more important for us to learn certain material and 'pour' the knowledge onto paper</p>	<p>Didactic pressure</p> <p>Neglect of passions</p> <p>Lack of empowerment and self-expression</p>
<p>In my school, you couldn't express yourself fully through clothes, hairstyle or manner because of the obligatory uniforms at school. Moreover, the school had a hierarchy of subjects and a division into sciences and humanities. According to the system, the most important subjects were those useful for efficient functioning in society. The above division meant that once a student was classified as a scientific mind, subjects such as Polish, history or civics were lost for him</p>	<p>Lack of individualism in self-presentation</p> <p>Lack of empowerment</p>
<p>In my school, the only element which was not neglected, but appeared quite rarely, was the realisation of need for aesthetic experiences by field trips to various cultural institutions. Because we rarely went on cultural outings, we had no contact, for example, with professional theatre, real art available for everyone. I find it important to be well-versed in areas of culture and to know how to behave in different cultural institutions. This kind of outings allow also for planting in yourself a passion for culture and art. I think that in some people it might cause a lack of interest in going to cultural places, because they were not doing it during education</p>	<p>Lack of participation in culture</p>
<p>The consequence was an unsatisfied need and, at the same time, students' prejudice towards certain teachers, which made the students less active in class, they did not want to cooperate with a given teacher in any way. The aspect of contact with higher culture, i.e., theatre or opera trips, was neglected or rarely introduced into cultural education. Such trips would normally happen once or twice throughout the whole education process. This is why now, as an adult, I do not feel fascinated by this type of culture and I find it difficult in reception</p>	<p>Lack of participation in culture</p>

Exemplary descriptions	Themes/Code
<p>The will to express oneself – uniforms at school; everybody looking the same and an attempt at expressing oneself through different clothes or original hairstyle punished with official reprimand.</p> <p>Only academic achievement (special competitions for the best students) is promoted and appreciated, while artistic achievement, in different fields, e.g., music, visual arts, dance, etc., connected with youth creativity and culture, is neglected and not appreciated</p>	<p>Lack of empowerment in self-presentation</p> <p>Marginalisation of art</p>
<p>Respect towards who I am, which resulted in lack of a real sense of freedom and expressing one's own opinion. Individual identity of students, who were often unable to present their own opinions and presented the school's opinions. The head teacher's opinions on every cultural subject were imposed on the students. Individual traits of each student, the head teacher paid special attention to each student's clothes. Innovativeness was not welcome</p>	<p>Lack of empowerment</p> <p>Individualism in self-presentation banned</p>
<p>Family, first contacts with culture: teachers demanded for some culture-forming traits to have been learnt at home, yet it was not always that simple. In the high school environment, there are students from different homes, who have different emotional situations. I think that it has significant consequences because the culture one learns at home is very important, it is a certain basis for the way one behaves but teachers should approach the issue more individually while talking about culture.</p> <p>School education: in high school, especially before the final examination, we did not have a chance to create our own interpretation in a lesson because we had to follow the answer key, which was to make us sure that we pass the exam. I was not happy about that as I think that everyone has a right to their own interpretation. The consequence of the lack of this component is narrowing the student's imagination and blocking their own opinion on a subject</p>	<p>Lack of interest in the student's family and their habitus.</p> <p>Lack of empowerment</p>
<p>Flawed methods, an example of Journalism classes could be given. We had no chance of learning about the journalist's work. We never learnt what a job in a publishing house or TV looks like, we did not even observe. Therefore, the lessons were not effective, as we only listened to dry facts</p>	<p>Faulty realisation of contents</p>
<p>There was no innovativeness. The school looked like in the 90s, even the computers dated back to that period! How can you teach the youth, prepare them for life, if the computer room can act as a time machine? There were even out-of-date Windows versions! What are the consequences? One could state that there was no progress in our learning. Personally, I missed but a pinch of modernity, teachers' cooperation with the media (...), new teaching methods. I regret that rarely did school adjust to Confucius' words : "Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, let me do it and I understand." In consequence, most of the lessons were boring (please do not mistake it with the content) and the students ceased to be interested, which in turn made our peers stop studying such subjects</p>	<p>Outdated school equipment</p>



Exemplary descriptions	Themes/Code
In my school, there were very few trips to cultural institutions. This is why students treated the subject of Knowledge of Culture as uninteresting and tedious because their only association with it was 'dry' studying. They could not see the beauty of culture because they did not experience it in direct contact. I also think that in my school there was a lack of extracurricular activities such as theatre or music clubs. This is why the students were unable to develop their passions, which would help them get to know culture better and provide some distraction from studying	Lack of participation in culture Neglect of students' potential
At school, you could not have a different opinion on some subject, you had to fit into the 'key', which is given and you could not interpret anything in your own way. Eventually, students could not be bothered to express their own opinions. In the first year of technical high school we had the Knowledge of Culture subject, yet the lessons were conducted in a manner discouraging the students. Additionally, you could not really discuss any subject because you had to fit the teacher's opinion. In my opinion, this resulted in the students' prejudice towards any classes connected with culture. In high school we almost never interpreted texts of culture together, which was a significant issue, as the students sometimes required assistance or any guidance whatsoever in order to understand. In consequence, nobody was prepared for the exam in Polish literature and very many people gave up taking the exam at all because they knew they would not handle the material and interpretation of a work of culture	Lack of empowerment Lack of knowledge  Neglect of discovering oneself through a text of culture

Source: own research

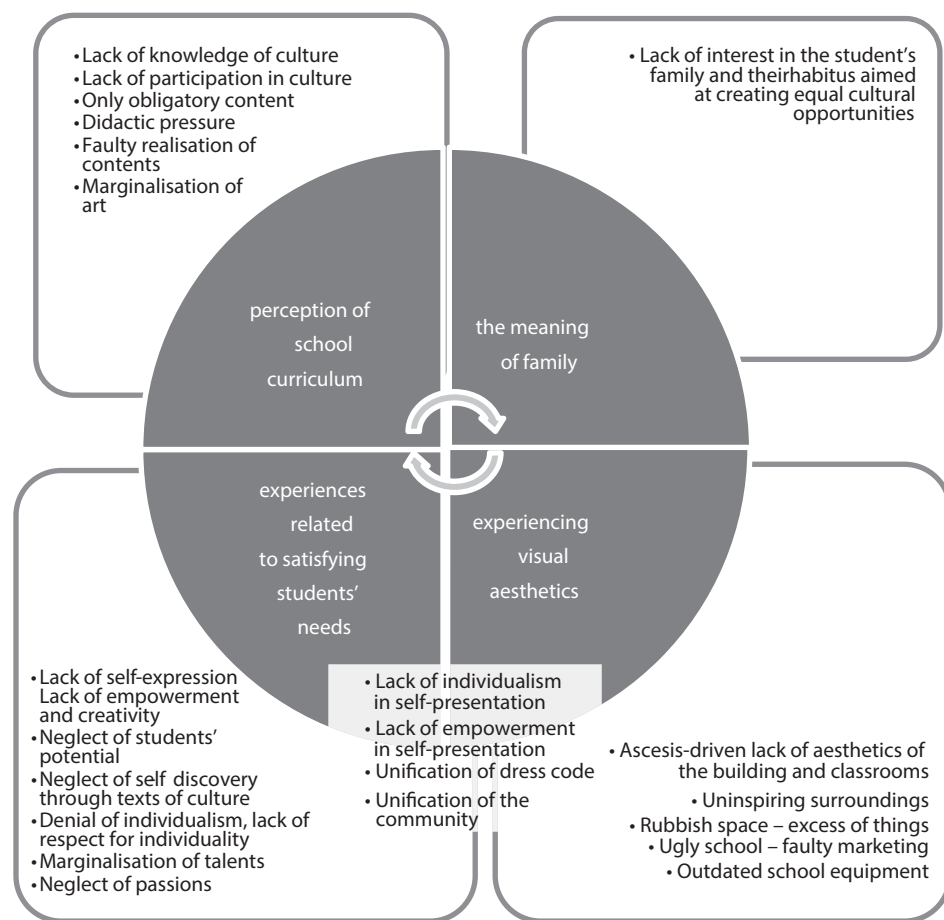
It seems that in their narrations the students refer to four levels in which they observe serious shortcomings resulting in the marginalisation of culture and aesthetics. However, their reports also brought about other, deeply concerning realisations. Young adults evaluate school rather critically (let us add that they do so with a delay of a kind – graduating from high schools in the year the study was being carried out). They did not have to worry about potential consequences of their words, but on the other hand, they were looking at education from a sentimental perspective. Among all the criticisms, lack of empowerment appears in the foreground. The constituents of this element are: suspending one's own opinion, respecting the possibility of everyone having their separate opinion and respecting its significance. Representing independent viewpoints was found inadmissible, threatening the apologetics of the answer key, which guarantees exam success. Moreover, the youth's viewpoint was not taken into account in the design of curricula or lesson scope. This is why the respondents signalled a neglect

of students' potential, their passions and obstructing creativity, sense of meaning and agency. No wonder the youth accept certain strategies – to survive, to pass, without any greater hope for the contents of the curriculum to prove useful. The respondents signalled that caustic education completely wasted the potential for discovering oneself through a text of culture. It means that all things connected with reflexive, intersubjective perception of art, giving the perceiver a chance for change, self-reflection, an attempt at an actual understanding of the world.

Another meaningful aspect is how the youth feel that school and teachers are not interested in the students' cultural habitus they bring from their family homes. The teachers surely know the situation of their students, but they do not respect the duty to provide equal opportunity for all, which is left to the institutional organs of education. The judgment of young adults, in turn, is not very uplifting either. They emphasise that school does not provide knowledge about culture, it does not inspire interest in culture, it displays flaws in presenting content, referring to a degenerated version of functionalism, without satisfying the student's cultural needs. There is an interesting issue concerning personal culture, and it refers to all the subjects of education.

Figure 2 presents the students' responses according to the themes contributing to the horizontalisation of data. The 4 horizons which were singled out are: perception of school education, the meaning of family, experiences connected with need satisfaction, and experiencing aesthetics. In the students' narratives, satisfying students' needs was often discussed in terms of aesthetics, especially a particular type of deprivation of liberty at school pertaining to self-presentation. Let us add that, by experiencing and living in the school reality, the respondents developed a conviction that a ban on independent self-presentation is a threat to individuality, freedom of self-expression, and repression of personality-related processes. Nobody negotiates the *dress code* with the youth, which makes them feel incapacitated. This might be the deadliest sin of the institution – depriving its stakeholders of the right to empowerment, having their own opinions, respecting their opinions and evaluations.

The respondents also wrote about school space aesthetics – they observed that an ugly school does not create an atmosphere suitable for learning while faulty colour arrangement scares students off and has an adverse effect on their mood. Sometimes one can even observe embarrassment caused by the likelihood of 'my school' not being chosen by prospective students due to deficits in its image. This is not only a mistake from the perspective of the school's marketing strategy, but also a reason for lack of identification with the place in which the youth spend almost a half their active time. The young respondents observe the overload and messi-



Source: own research

**Figure 2.** Horizons ascribed to deficits and negligence of aesthetic education in the eyes of students/graduates

ness of space, shabby walls, missing door handles or modern electronic equipment. Thus, the opinion of our experts-students, experiencing school aesthetics and experiencing culture through it, is not an optimistic one.

It is important, however, that there were also responses indicating good practices or even exemplary dimensions of aesthetical education. While there was only a small number of them, these responses show that a proper organisation of education and the space it takes place in is possible. The following narration is a proof:

"I think that the best approach to cultural education could be found in my junior high school, which had Creative Activity Classes. Those classes had extra subjects: Education for Creativity – theatre and Education for Creativity – humanities. In those lessons, we learnt about theoretical aspects of interpreting works of art, we watched films, learnt to interpret them (...), we worked on various projects related to theatre or work on a film set. We kept going to the theatre, to the cinema, to various cultural institutions, museums. We took part in various workshops on theatre, film, visual arts, graffiti, and many others (...) In the classrooms ascribed to the creative activity lessons, we could hang our works, modify the room space (...) We learnt how to express our opinions and support them with arguments. We could express ourselves with clothes, appearance".

However idyllic this vision may be, I do not find it unattainable. The emergence of creative classes does indeed sanction the necessity to treat the student as a partner in education and not an object of influence. How different is this example from the narration by the student from the Journalism class (quoted in Table 2). That earlier narration shows us that the youth have never even touched upon the essence of the profession, learning the history of journalism rather than how to be a journalist. It could be assumed that if those students had had a say in shaping the curriculum, it would have looked differently, would have put more emphasis on experiencing work on preparing a text or reportage, also in a narration different from verbal. Now it is high time the students had a voice and – most importantly – high time we learned how to listen to this voice. Let this thought seal the presented deliberations.

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